

Gethsemane and the Problem of Suffering⁵

Gethsemane is the spot where the great encounter took place, where humankind met with God.

It was not by chance that Jesus sought out a garden at night where He could be distressed and troubled and where His soul became sorrowful with that amazing sorrow unto death. Was it not in the Garden of Paradise that Adam was stripped naked by sin and went out from the presence of God, so that mankind in Adam entered into a state of separation from God and into death?

Even though it is true that humankind experienced a full encounter with God in the birth of Jesus, this was only on the foundation of Jesus' acceptance of a full encounter with us. In Gethsemane, too, we met together with Him; there is no meeting more meaningful than that which takes place in the sharing of suffering, unless it be in the sharing of death itself when we touch immortality.

The suffering that oppresses us in this life, whether in body or in spirit, was plumbed to the depths by Jesus: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Mt. 26:38). There is no sorrow that can bring the soul to the point of death except the sorrow of shame and sin. It was in Gethsemane that Jesus made the irrevocable decision to accept the shame of humanity. He consented to go to the approaching trial as a blasphemer and evil-doer, accused of the two sins that are the basis of all sin.

How did Jesus accept the shame of man?

Christ's acceptance of the shame of man must be counted a mystery. In order for us to discern it we must drain ourselves of all feelings and emotion; there are few who can attain to this. Just as the Lord took our nature and was united to it without its diminishing or changing His divinity, so too He consented that His body should, in Gethsemane, take on our stain without being soiled. He did not take sin upon Him merely in thought, or symbolically or in imagination, for as the Bible says, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree" (1 Pt. 2:24).

At this point, who can discern the mystery of Christ and the heart of redemption?

All we can say is that just as He approached the incarnation and brought it about through His will, so by His will He bore our sin in His body. And when God wills anything, it is so. If His hunger, thirst, and weariness are evidence to us that He was incarnate in a truly human nature, so His distress and grief and the sorrow of His soul are evidence that of His free will He mysteriously accepted what mankind was to lay upon Him on the cross.

⁵ **From the book** With Christ in His Passion, Death, and Resurrection **by**
Fr. Matthew the Poor, first published in Arabic in 1961.

Just as the lamb of the sacrifice in ancient times used to bear a person's sin and die with it for the sinner without the lamb itself being considered sinful, so the Son of God, the "Lamb of God" (Jn. 1:29) who takes away the sin of the whole world, became sin for us, but remained utterly sinless. "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteous of God" (2 Co. 5:21). He remained just as He was, "holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (Heb. 7:26).

Just as He, in us, became sin although He remained utterly sinless, so we, in Him, have become utterly without sin, although we are sinful human beings. "He took what was our portion and gave us what was His, so let us praise and glorify and exalt Him."⁶

We met together in Gethsemane and with that the problem of suffering, which has bowed our back and crushed our soul, comes to an end forever.

Before Gethsemane suffering was a punishment

The pain and sadness that follow disasters, injustices, and hardships, and the sickness, humiliation, and degradation that accompany them, remained a question that had no answer, except in the words "sin" and "punishment."

There was no hope in suffering as long as there was no cure for sin. And sorrow was bitter and destructive as long as there was no ransom for punishment.

Moreover, the unjust distribution of suffering caused distress, anxiety, and bewilderment. An innocent child may be the victim of wrong, suffering, and torture just as much as the most evil of men. It may be that good and humble men suffer more than the recalcitrant and profligate, for there is no way to discover any law or principle that governs the distribution of suffering. Why? Because sin ruled over man instead of God, and sin knows no law. The law of sin is injustice; its rule is inequality and its principle is tyranny.

Now if we chose sin by our own desire, could we blame God that we have fallen under sin's oppressive law? So that we would not blame our Creator for the suffering that bears down upon us as a result of the sin we committed by our own capricious will, God sent His Son in a human body to suffer the sufferings of man, though He Himself did not deserve to suffer. In Gethsemane, and after, the Son of God suffered and His soul was sorrowful unto death, and His sweat fell in drops like blood, as though He were bleeding from some hidden wound.

Let us consider this: If a sinful man suffers and is oppressed by a certain amount of pain, it is because this is the law of sin. And if a good man suffers more than an evil man, it is because the law of sin holds sway over them both; in the rule of sin there is no just distribution.

And if an innocent child suffers as adults do, it is because he is a child of sin, born only to injustice and oppression.

But why is it that Christ should bear this overwhelming suffering? Why should His soul grieve with a great sorrow unto death? For He was born of the Holy Spirit and a pure Virgin; He lived without sin and said, "I am the truth" (Jn. 14:6). Must we not therefore understand that Christ deliberately accepted His unjust suffering and consented to bearing

⁶ Coptic psalmody: Theotokia of Friday.

the iniquitous sentence “with loud cries and tears” (Heb. 5:7)?

It may be true that there are men who have suffered unjustly and have been penalized more severely than their sins warranted, but what shall we say of Christ? In His suffering He bore all injustice and by the crushing sorrow of His soul He paid the penalty for all sin. As it is said by Isaiah the prophet:

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole. . . All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth . . . although He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in His mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief; when He makes Himself an offering for sin . . . He poured out His soul to death.

(Is. 53:4-12)

Then pain became a gift

So it was that God eliminated the oppression of suffering and its injustice and tyrannical law—not with a message, or a law, or a vision, or an angel, but by coming as a man, bearing that very oppression, and submitting to the law of injustice, being afflicted but not opening His mouth. Christ, by accepting suffering in this way, gave pain itself a greater value, for after ‘being a deserved punishment for sin, it became a sacrifice of love and a work of redemption. From then on suffering was no more bound to sin. Ended was the feeling that tortured man in his heart and conscience that he was under punishment and paying retribution. Such feelings as these would undermine his whole psychological condition and burden him with care, anxiety, and the sicknesses of death, but now, if we are in Christ, we can undergo suffering on the level of His suffering, not as a just consequence of sin, but as a participation in the suffering of love, self-sacrifice, and redemption. Pain, no matter what form it may take, has in Christ become a gift: “Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love . . . to the sons of men!” (Ps. 107:8).

And a participation in love with Christ

When Christ underwent the appalling suffering even though He did not deserve to bear the least pain, He transformed the meaning of the injustice of suffering. Before, a man who suffered unjustly would raise his eyes to heaven to blame God or ask for mercy, but he would receive no reply, no answer, no consolation; sin had cut the man off from his Creator and had cruelly locked together the suffering man and his offender, driving them together to death and destruction, for that is the way of sin and where it leads. Now the suffering man is forever free from sin in Christ; he sees no injustice in his suffering, no matter how great his pain or how complete his innocence. He sees and feels that his suffering has nothing to do with paying a debt or atoning for a crime, since the severest

pain, or indeed all the pain of humanity gathered together, could not atone for even a small sin. Sin is a breach with God and a departure from His presence. Were suffering a punishment and no more, and if we paid the penalty, then who would bring about the reconciliation? Even if we died to pay the price of sin, who would bring us to life again and take us into the presence of God?

But Christ abolished sin, and reconciled and brought us to life. In so doing He broke the fearful link that bound suffering to sin. For suffering is no longer a participation in the sin of Adam, but a participation in the love of Christ.

If we are in Christ, no matter how much we suffer, and no matter how severe our pain, our suffering is in no way related to whether we deserve that pain. Suffering is no longer a penalty for anything, nor is it a means of atoning for anything, or a punishment for anything. It was sin that decreed that suffering should be a form of penalty or atonement or punishment, and Christ eliminated sin after paying its penalty, atoning for it, and bearing its punishment.

It is now therefore as if man suffers for nothing, or for no reason or excuse; this is the type of suffering Christ bore! This is the liturgy of the suffering of love, self-sacrifice, and redemption. This is participation in the divinity, “provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him” (Rm. 8:17).

And finally, participation in the glory and joys of resurrection

Can we now understand the meaning of the saying, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake” (Ph. 1:29)? And discern that pain, after being a punishment, has become in Christ a gift? And that the gift of suffering not caused by sin is inevitably a participation in glory?

If we notice the words of James the Apostle, “Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials” (Jm. 1:2), we discover that any suffering of any kind is unavoidably linked with Christ, and that we must receive it with joyful thanks, knowing that, “as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Co. 1:5).

So we no longer suffer for sin, but for Christ. All pain outside of Christ is sin, and the pain of sin is death.

The sufferings of a man who is living with Christ are not counted as the result of sin. They are the sufferings of righteousness; they are joy and peace: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings” (Col. 1:24); they are a participation in the supreme sacrifice of love which Jesus offered through His suffering and perfected by His death: “That I may know Him...and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death” (Ph. 3:10).

If we are in Christ, the more our sufferings increase, the more in fact, our participation in this sacrifice increases. The bond is strengthened between us and the resurrection with its joys. Thus it is that the meaning of unjust suffering has been completely reversed; having been violent oppression under the law of sin which held sway over the world, it has now become the measure of a great gift and a mark of worthiness for glory and the joy of the resurrection. “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death” (Rm. 8:2). The Apostle Peter also speaks out of his own

The Deep Meaning of Fasting
Gethsemane and the Problem of Suffering

experience: “For one is approved of if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly” (1 Pt. 2:19).

Thanks be to God the Father and the Lord Jesus. “Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love . . . to the sons of men” (Ps. 107:8).

All you who suffer, be comforted, for your pain is no longer a result of sin, but a participation in love and in the suffering of Gethsemane.

All you who sorrow and weep, rejoice, for your grief is not unto death; in the sorrow of Christ it is reserved for the resurrection.